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Lawmakers Weigh Reactor Plans

Vow to fight proposal to keep it sealed

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Congressmen Tim Bishop and Steve Israel vowed this week to fight a plan that would keep Brookhaven National Laboratory's radioactive graphite research reactor sealed off for 87,000 years, adding their dismayed voices to those of environmentalists who say a more thorough cleanup is needed.


"Our purpose is to explore the options with the Department of Energy, and get 87,000 off the table," Israel said at a news conference following an emergency meeting of the Brookhaven National Laboratory Citizen Advisory Committee early this week. "If the decision is based on science, then I'm fine with it, but if the decision is based on budgets, then they have to think about their priorities."

Officials from the laboratory and the U.S. Department of Energy emphasized that keeping the reactor contained instead of removing it entirely is only one of the options under preliminary consideration. The DOE is expected to release a proposed remedial action plan with a "preferred alternative" for the site in June, said DOE Deputy Area Manager Frank Crescenzo, but it is not yet clear which alternative will be chosen.

The other two options currently under consideration are to remove the entire reactor and the radiation, which would cost about \$96 million, or to remove most of the radiation but leave the reactor's buildings, at a cost of about \$40 million. The containment option would cost \$275,000 a year in surveillance and maintenance, according to DOE officials.

Although some environmental groups represented on the laboratory's advisory committee have vocally opposed the containment plan, arguing that it will allow radiation to leak into the soil, there are members of the committee who favor it.

"I know that the material right there is not causing any harm to humans anywhere," said George Proios, Suffolk County's chief environmental analyst. "There may have been leaks in the past and there has been some contamination, but we know where it is. It's still on the laboratory's property."



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Adrienne Esposito of the Citizen's Campaign for the Environment strongly disagreed with this, saying future contamination is likely if radiation is allowed to move through the groundwater.

Proios said there are other problems with the \$96-million plan to remove the whole reactor, even apart from its cost. Removing the contaminated concrete dome that covers the reactor could cause more toxic waste when it is sawed and dust is created, Proios said, and there is a potential for workers to be put in danger or for an accident to occur during the removal or transportation of the toxic materials.

And, Proios said, there is the question of where to move the radioactive waste, which will take an estimated 87,000 years to become safe regardless of where it is.

"No matter whose hole you bury it in," Proios said, "it doesn't change the time frame."

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